4:Metraux E-5 (1939) 1944 SI7 Mataco SI7

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Report on the Ethnography of the Mataco Indians of the Argentine Gran Chaco
(Nota Etnografica Sobre Los Indios Mataco del Gran Chaco Argentino)

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Buenos Aires: 1944
Relaciones de la Sociedad Argentina de Anthropologia, Vol. 4

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Human Relations Area Files

1959

[Title page]

Report on the Ethnography of the Mataco Indians of the Argentine Gran Chaco

1.4 [7] The ethnography of the Argentine Gran Chaco is still very little known, and will continue thus, for ever, if we do not make the effort now to study systematically the last tribes of Indians still extant but fast disappearing or being assimilated into the non-Indian population.

Our best sources for the study of the ethnography of the Chaco still are the Jesuit missionaries of the eighteenth century: Dobrizhoffer, Paucke, Sánchez Labrador, Lozano and Jolis. Present day authors have studied the more directly accessible aspects of the Indian civilizations and therefore their contributions give us only a very superficial idea of Indian life as it is still lived on the Bermejo or Pilcomayo rivers. Even within the realm of material culture, open as it is to all, we are merely given catalogues of objects instead of the information which we might expect regarding economic life and techniques in the broadest sense of the word. Often the living Indians of the Chaco are treated as though they were archeological sites. It would be preferable to allow modern ethnography to take the place of archeology, rather than the other way about.

We have only a very vague idea as to the religious beliefs of those Indians. Descriptions of dances or speculations regarding animism are poor substitutes for an analysis of their beliefs and practices. As for the sociology of the Chaco, it is almost virgin ground [8] and contemporary studies dealing with it are very much below the standard of those made in the eighteenth century.

In 1939, on the occasion of my last trip to the Argentine Chaco, I had hoped to gather the necessary material on the Matacos. The state of my health kept me from doing so. For this reason I must publish the results of this trip in separate articles. In the present state of our knowledge, every new fact, if it has been precisely observed, becomes important. This consideration, together with the encouragement of my friend Doctor Fernando Márquez Miranda, prompts me to publish certain portions of my field notes. They have no other worth than that of being unpublished to date and of having been set

114 down on the field, from the reports of excellent informants. They have been obtained in San Andres and Yuto, on the Pilcomayo river, and in San Patricio, on the river Bermejo.

Birth and Infancy

842 754 The child is produced by the father's seed, which germinates, as does a plant, within the mother. Sterility is always considered by the Matacos to be the mother's fault. They explain it as being an accident brought about by some witch doctor who is using magic to prevent the sperm from getting into the woman's body. It is said that some women go to a witch doctor with the express purpose of having conception prevented. The witch doctors can, furthermore, break the enchantment, although this is considered an extraordinarily difficult thing to do.

843 A pregnant woman eats moderately so that the child will not grow too large and cause difficulty at birth. The mystical bonds between father and child find their expression in a great number of "tabus." Thus, just prior to the child's birth, the father must abstain from all work that might cause the child to be deformed. He is prohibited, in particular, from using any instrument with a cutting edge (axes, knives, hoes) in order to avoid the child's coming into the world with wounds, a harelip, for instance. The father is careful not to wear sandals or shoes, in order to ensure that the infant not have one foot larger than the other. If the father should put on a hat, the upper part of [9] the child's head will be absolutely flat. The mission [212] Indians go so far as to keep from writing, fearful that the offspring be born with a wrinkled face.

If a father to be kills only male animals on the hunt, it is a sign that the child about to be born will be a male.

Precautions of various kinds are likewise taken by the women before the child's birth. They avoid girding themselves too tightly about the waist with a belt and sleeping in a position which might lead to a difficult birth. Some women make use of drugs to make sure that no accident will overtake them. To this end they take a powder made

843 from a certain tuber which has been roasted and then ground in a mortar. The husband unties his belt and undoes the knot in his tie so that the umbilical cord not wrap itself about the child's neck.

844 Only on rare occasions are there any complications at birth. According to the observations of a medical missionary, Doctor Collins Smith, labor lasts about two [sic] hours for the first child and around four or five hours for the others. A delivery often gathers a numerous crowd, and the neighbors take up positions close to the woman who is in labor, without showing any particular interest, but ready to take part should it be necessary to render any assistance. Old women, greatly experienced, come to assist the woman in labor, especially if the delivery is a difficult one. These benevolent matrons usually receive a gift--a goat or a piece of cloth--by way of payment for their trouble.

The pregnant woman who is about to deliver is placed on the thighs of one of these crones, who is seated cross-legged on the ground. She takes hold, with both hands, of a pole which is stuck vertically into the earth in front of her and grips it firmly as the pains become greater. Other informants have told me that women give birth to their babies in a squatting position directly onto the ground; but they confirmed the matter of the use of a rod or pole stuck into the earth. If the labor is difficult or longer than is usual, one of the matrons presses the body of the uterus with her hands as would a doctor wishing to expulse the placenta mechanically. If the woman in labor is unable to keep her sitting position, she lies down in such a manner that one of the helpers may rest her knee against the perineum, while another woman massages her in the uterine region.

Any mishap which may occur in the process is [10] attributed to witchcraft or to the husband's negligence who may have violated one of the numerous "tabus" which he is obliged to observe.

The umbilical cord is cut with a knife. It is never cut before the appearance of the placenta, as a child's life is not complete until his placenta has been expelled. According to one of my informants [752] the navel wound is cauterized with an incandescent pumpkin stalk. If the placenta is long in coming, the women exert upon the abdomen the same type of pressure used to accelerate the baby's birth. The placenta is buried without any kind of ceremony. The umbilical cord is dried and put into a little leather bag in the shape of a rhomboid, which the child carries about his neck until he is ten years old.

845 766 A child born dead is buried immediately without any ceremony. It is considered as waste matter just as is the placenta. On the other hand, if the child dies after having lived for a few hours it is buried according to the traditional funeral rites.

846 262 After the birth of their child both father and mother continue to take various precautions of a magical nature in order not to undermine the child's health. They abstain from certain foods, among others, from the flesh of the tatú [type of armadillo--Translator] and of the iguana. All infractions of food "tabus" will cause the child to have stomach trouble. Certain "tabus" last from one to two years. 834 The husband abstains from all sexual intercourse with his wife until such time as the baby has teeth.

856 Some practices have, in the Indians' opinion, the magical power of influencing the child's growth. Thus, the parents may ask a woman who has beautiful hair to cut off a lock and rub their little daughter's head with it. A person whose limbs are very well shaped will be asked to massage the legs of a child. In general, parents are pleased when well formed persons take their baby in arms to communicate their good looks.

853 A woman will feed only her own child and refuses to breast feed any other baby. Nevertheless one can see, on occasion, grandmothers giving the breast to a baby, but this is only to [11] pacify them and not to nourish them as some assert. When the child is about a year old, his mother chews up grains of boiled corn and introduces [862] this paste, with her fingers, into the little one's mouth. In order to pacify their babies, whom my presence frightened, the mothers would keep feeding them continually. Likewise when a child would make a fuss in church, its mother would start by patting it gently and saying "hush," "hush," "hush" to it in order to calm it down, but if this measure did not bring about the necessary effect she would put it to breast.

855 I do not remember ever seeing a man or a woman mistreat a child. The following episode, which I observed in a Mataco village, may be considered typical. A little child about two years old was screaming madly without apparent cause. His mother jumped him up and down on her knees in the hope of pacifying him; then she closed his mouth with her hand. As the little fellow continued to scream

855 and carry on, his mother essayed to see whether dragging him off to some distance from the hut would help, but he struggled and rolled on the ground. Finally she controlled him and, without any short temperedness, and laughing all the time she set him down a few yards from the house where the child continued to cry but did not dare to return.

857 861 This same gentleness and absence of brutality can be observed among playing children. Thus, on numerous occasions I have been able to observe little children vying for possession of a small ball; they would push and charge into each other, but never maliciously or violently. Mataco education stresses sweetness and gentleness and a [151] violent man or one of evil character (witsax) [? Translator] inspires them with fear and disgust. From the tenderest age children learn to share their food. When I used to distribute candy the children would never fail to let the absent ones know so that they might have a part of what was being given.

Abortion and Infanticide

847 Abortion and infanticide used to be practiced by the Matacos on a large scale, as also among the other Chaco tribes. According to my informants, a woman has an abortion when she is pregnant and not married; when she has been abandoned by her husband or, after a quarrel with him, for vengeance. Many women undergo abortions when they are [12] pregnant for the first time, in the hope that such action will make future deliveries easier.

It is very generally held that the Chaco Indian women use powerful drugs to cause abortion, but this is doubtless merely legendary. The aids of which they make use are purely mechanical. During the fifth month after conception they get a friend to pound them on their abdomen until the blood begins to flow.

Marriage

832 In amorous relations the young girls appear to take more of the initiative than do the men. They easily become provocative and make

832 use of all kinds of tricks and small stratagems to inflame desire in the men. It is during the dances held at night, more than at any other time, that one can see the maneuverings of the girls. The young men show more circumspection and have recourse to a go-between when they wish to make their passion known. They will send the girl they love a messenger carrying a torch or lamp. If the girl is willing she has only to follow the emissary.

584 It is not uncommon for the parents to take upon themselves the arrangement of a marriage. Should the union later be an unhappy one and end in divorce, one or the other of the couple will find consolation in saying: "I didn't want to marry, my parents are responsible."

591 In general residence in matrilocal, that is to say, the husband goes to live in his wife's parents' house. Nevertheless, it can happen, especially if the woman is older than her husband, that the wife goes to live with the man's family. But patrilocal residence is a rare occurrence.

[851] After the birth of a child, the new couple may build a separate house, but always in the woman's village. The Mataco young men of the Pilcomayo region who have married girls from the Bermejo have all taken up residence in this latter place.

606 Matrilocal residence presents the husband with certain problems. I have heard young men complain of this custom. They said that their parents-in-law would take possession of the fruits of their labor and of the hunt. It is not uncommon for a man to divorce his [568] wife in order to escape from the [13] tyranny of her family. Furthermore, the woman's parents are always ready to turn against their son-in-law should their daughter have some cause for complaint. A family always has something to gain from the marriage of a daughter for it supplies the aid of a man in the prime of life.

575 Polygamy seems to have been, in most cases, the prerogative of the chiefs. In San Patricio there was a chief with three wives. The erstwhile chief of San Andrés had two wives by whom he had had five children.

684 In a case of adultery the husband does not take the matter up with his wife but rather works out his rage on her lover. He may kill him or oblige him to pay indemnity. I know of a case in which a Mataco took possession of the wagon of another man who was accused of having had intimate relations with his wife.

The Functions of the Chief

622 The ex-chief of the San Andrés region, on the Pilcomayo river, was the famous Cuchitoro, who received three leagues of land along the river from the government of Argentina. The present day chief of this region is called Santiago, and he was made chief by the white colonizers who hoped to win him to their service. Nevertheless, Santiago remained loyal to his people.

The principal functions of the chief, according to their [648] description to me at San Andrés, consist nowadays in representing his tribe before the whites and in patching up, amicably, any conflicts 622 arising between groups of Indians in his territory. If a murder is com- 627 mitted in one group it is the chief's duty to require the killer's family 682 to pay the blood price. The amount of such compensation depends upon the social status of the victim. If it is a matter of an old and inactive man the loss is considered of little importance and a couple of goats and an old rifle are sufficient to re-establish friendly relations between the victim's and the murderer's groups. In other cases the injured party demands a horse, three goats, a rifle, etc. If the blood price is put too high the chief in charge of the matter may seek out the head of the dead man's family and ask him to lower the price. [14]

682 In former times the law of an eye for an eye was meticulously carried out. The Indians of San Andrés had killed a man from a neighboring village whose inhabitants then emigrated to the Bermejo river. Fifteen years later a nephew of the dead man made the entire trip from the Bemejo to the Pilcomayo to square matters with the murderers and killed, in his turn, one of the Indians of the village. He then returned to the Bermejo without being pursued.

726 The last Indian war took place in the San Andrés region in 1928. The people of the village of San Martín attacked San Andrés, under cover of darkness. Firing continued until daylight, but--as often happens in these battles--no one was killed or wounded. Some time later the people of Yuto joined with the inhabitants of San Andrés to attack the San Martín Indians. They passed by the Mission composed and dressed for war, painted and adorned with feathers. Before the attack they executed a war dance in the bed of the Pilcomayo river,

726 which was dry at the time. Then, moving along the left bank, they came upon the people of San Martín from the rear, cutting off their retreat. A large number of the latter, mostly women and children [127] were killed or wounded. The Yuto people carried off a child with them as a prisoner.

Divers Religious Beliefs

776 158 Among the spirits the most to be feared are the wilan who possess their victims and sink them into a state of furious madness. Thus, in the San Patricio mission a young girl all at once became pale, her eyes starting from their sockets. She fled, bolting into the wooded area, where she remained for four days. Those who followed her said that her tracks disappeared as suddenly as if the girl had flown through the air.

Another girl got up from a fainting spell during which she had been under the care of four witch doctors and said that a spirit had entered her.

Here is a case which took place in San Andrés a short time before my arrival. A Mataco had gone off to some distance from the village in search of a horse. On the way back he imagined that he saw against [15] a tree, a small luminous being, about the size of a cooking pot, which leaped from tree to tree and finally disappeared in the underbrush. Frightened, our Indian fled to the village where he fell in a faint and was shaken by violent convulsions. Doctor C. Smith had to give him a morphine injection to quiet him. The Indian got better and a few days later felt well enough to go out into the surrounding area. On the way back he had the same experience and suffered like aberrations. His parents, shaking with fright, went to get the doctor so that he might give him an injection. According to Dr. C. Smith, such hallucinations may be the result of kidney trouble, which causes the diseased person to have optical illusions, especially the apparition of luminous spots before the eyes. Certain strange and sinister sounds, also, which the Mataco Indians attribute to spirits [82] are really made by nocturnal birds. And a meteor, which fell into the Pilcomayo during my stay there was explained to me by the Matacos as the fall of an old man with gray hair.

776 The Indians will willingly speak about the lewo, mythical animals which live in the lakes and which look like serpents. Their [824] breath forms the rainbow (lewo-tutsax, which means lewo breath). [841] The lewo have a horror of women during the period of menstruation and if any woman should approach a pool or river in that state, the lewo will call up a tempest.

The Witch Doctors

756 The witch doctors get their power from the spirits, who teach them the magic dances. The soul of a witch doctor can be snatched away by a wilan or spirit and shut up in a tree. The spirit teaches him the language of the spirits and when his education is complete the spirit blows upon the novice and confers upon him the power of caring for the sick by the same means, that is, by blowing upon them. The meetings between spirits and witch doctors are very frequent, and take place at night.

In order to take the soul out of the body and send it on a super- [278] natural mission, the witch doctors inhale up their noses a powder made [624] with roasted grains of sebil (Piptadenia sp.) to which they sometimes add powdered tobacco. These inhalations cause them to become dazed [16] and then it is that the witch doctor's soul abandons his body and turns into an insect or a bird--usually the yulo--and goes off to alight on a tree which stands in the middle of a lake. This tree is perpetually shaking and it is extremely difficult to stay on it. A grave misfortune overtakes those who fall for they are immediately devoured by the palometas ["piranas" - a laterally flattened, ferocious, small fish - Translator] and crocodiles which swam in the lake. If the witch doctors are expert in their art they change themselves into lizards and so manage to stay on the tree. It is supposed that each witch doctor owns a branch of that tree which is closely allied with his destiny. While the leaves remain green the witch doctor enjoys good health and is in no danger but as soon as the branch starts to wither then his troubles begin.

[821] The witch doctors can predict good and bad weather for a long time in advance, for on their journeyings they see the green and dry leaves corresponding to the good and bad seasons of the year.

756 The witch doctors have, also, the power of turning themselves into animals or fire that licks up the underbrush in their path.

In order to overcome diseases, the witch doctors make use of [825] small wands which the spirits have given them; they use also the wings of several birds (yulo, carancho).

Animals as well as men can be treated by the witch doctors. An informant described to me the treatment which was given to a horse. The witch doctor first recited an enchantment and then applied suction to the horse's rump until he was able to extract a small piece of wood which he said was the cause of the malady.

[754] Some witch doctors are extremely dangerous. They start by devouring dogs and then go on to attack men. It is almost impossible to put an end to their criminal career for they revive if they are killed and if they are burned to death they will still return.

[562] Some women can become witch doctors, although they enjoy far less prestige than do the man. Their vocation is made apparent by the following signs: they spend hours on end crouched over the ground, continually swaying back and forth, finally they make an attempt to flee into the underbrush and their strength is such that several men cannot restrain them. Once off in the bush, they tear off their [17] clothes and climb a tree, where they remain for several days swaying and singing.

Magic

789 609 The Matacos of San Andrés complain bitterly that their neighbors the Tobas of the Pilcomayo river are great practitioners of magic. During the period of my stay at their village a Toba arrived to visit one of his friends. Not finding him at home he went to several huts in the hope of finding him. When he left, the Matacos accused him of witchcraft and said that his comings and goings were only to gather leavings (hair, nail parings, pieces of cloth, etc.) belonging to the people he had visited. The fact is that many of the persons whose houses the Toba visited became sick, which only confirmed the Matacos' suspicions. Nevertheless no sanction whatever came from this to the supposed criminal.

Funeral Rites

763 If the eyes of a dying person become fixed in a stare, his soul cannot escape and his agony is prolonged. That is why the Matacos cover the faces of the dying with a piece of cloth and knot it about the throat. This cloth often contributes to accelerate the end by asphyxiating them. Their rush to bury the dead is so great that it sometimes results in the interment of persons who are still alive.

764 The widow, her head shaved, is isolated in a corner of the hut, separated from the rest of the room by a curtain, or else she is placed in a small annex attached to the hut.

[62] Immediately after the death of a young man who had committed suicide in the village of San Patricio, his mother crouched on the earth, placed the dead boy's head on her knees and began to grieve for him, saying repeatedly the word "yos," "yos" (my son, my son). The father beat a drum, day and night in accompaniment of a dirge in which the expression "yos," "yos," was much in evidence. A group of women, under the direction of the mother who was shaking a rattle [18] executed a dance which consisted of little jumpy steps near the place where the corpse had been placed before the burial.

[581] A widower or a widow may marry again two or three months after their spouse's demise. The women excuse themselves by saying: "I had to eat, I need someone who will clothe me."

Burial up in a tree, as described by Enrique Palavecino, used at one time to be very common in the middle region of the Bermejo.

Belief in the Reality of Dreams

787 842 The missionary Barbrooke Grubb has given numerous examples of the belief of the Lengua Indians in the reality of dreams. I have myself collected a good many examples of this belief among the Tobas and Pilagas. Here is an anecdote which illustrates this attitude among the Matacos. A girl from the village of San Patricio woke up weeping one beautiful morning. When asked about the cause of her sorrow, she answered that she had dreamed that she had had sexual relations with a young man and was afraid of becoming pregnant... (Footnote: Sent from the Smithsonian Institute of Washington by the author, a corresponding member. Translated from the French by Dr. Fernando Márquez Miranda, also a member).